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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TEL AVIV 005800

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SUBJECT: NSA EILAND ON POST-DISENGAGEMENT STEPS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz. Reason 1.4 (B/D)

1. (C) Summary: Israeli National Security Advisor Giora Eiland briefed NEA DAS Elizabeth Dibble September 21 on steps Israel and the Palestinians can take over the coming year to build on the success of Israeli disengagement. DAS Dibble raised the situation at Rafah, and Eiland cited major points of agreement with the Palestinians on next steps. He also expressed a willingness to be flexible on the time it would take to reach an understanding with all the parties involved in discussions about Rafah. Note: this conversation took place prior to this weekend's events in Gaza and does not, therefore, reflect the current situation on the ground, or the Israeli reaction to it. End Summary.

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DISENGAGEMENT: LESSONS LEARNED  
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2. (C) DAS Dibble asked NSA Eiland to share his observations on disengagement. Eiland cited several positive elements:

-- The days of disengagement proved to be the most peaceful period of the past five years.

-- People on both sides -- Palestinian and Israeli -- are tired of violence. This creates a better basis for the future. Eiland said that over the past six to eight months Israel had several excuses for retaliation to Palestinian attacks, but the GOI refrained for (external) political reasons and because the message from the Israeli people has been: "Don't escalate or enter a cycle of violence -- even if we can justify it."

-- Hamas is not like Al-Qaida. It is an organization that is very popular and very sensitive to the level of support it enjoys with the Palestinian people.

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HAMAS AND PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS  
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3. (C) Addressing why Hamas kept quiet when it would appear against their interest and image, Eiland surmised that had Hamas instigated violence during disengagement, Palestinians would have questioned its motives and asked why sacrifice (i.e. casualties that would likely have resulted from Israeli retaliation) were necessary to achieve an objective that had already been realized.

4. (C) In response to the DCM's question about Hamas and Palestinian elections, Eiland said the coming January elections are the main factor that determines Hamas policy, including Hamas respect for the PA's call for calm. Calm is in the clear mutual interest of all Palestinian parties, especially in Gaza, according to Eiland's analysis. He cautioned that after the election things will change. "Once Hamas has achieved its objective of strengthening its political power, it will be able to undermine any political process its leaders do not support." Eiland also predicted that Hamas will end the current truce ("tahdiya") and concentrate on violence in the West Bank.

5. (C) DAS Dibble asked Eiland whether Hamas might decide that the political route is the way to go. Eiland replied that there is no precedent for such a move. He situated Hamas within the international network and ideology of the Muslim Brothers. "Pragmatic moves may be made for a certain time, but that will not necessarily result in the transformation (of Hamas) into a political party willing to give up its ideology (rejecting Israel's existence) or its measures (terrorism)." In response to PolCouns' follow-up question, Eiland clarified that Hamas does not see itself as being "in the opposition." Its leaders see Hamas as a coequal of the PA. Hamas will cooperate with the PA, but if Hamas leaders disagree with the PA, "they will do it their way. They do not accept PA rule (over them)." In fact, Eiland said, Hamas has established areas where PA police are not allowed, and Hamas maintains its own checkpoints.

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FATAH/TANZIM  
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6. (C) Turning from Hamas, Eiland noted that the PA controls the biggest independent militia: the Tanzim organization.

"So when we talk about disarming militias, Fatah (must be accountable too)."

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NO WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY  
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17. (C) Eiland said the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is more severe than is currently perceived by many observers after disengagement. This dispute is not about the content of a final settlement so much as it is about the process leading to it. According to Eiland, the official Israeli position is that the disengagement from Gaza was unique: "(There will be) no more steps in the future (in the West Bank)." Final status talks are premature until the PA dismantles militias. Before this is done, "it would be wrong for us to touch political substance," Eiland maintained. Eiland analyzed the PA's position as exactly the opposite: The PA will not dismantle militias until there is a comprehensive political solution, with detailed benchmarks, a timetable, and international guarantees. The PA narrative, through Eiland's eye, continues: "Only then will we (the Palestinians) have the will and strength to get to the 'one authority, one weapon, one law' endgame."

18. (C) Before respective Palestinian and Israeli elections, there will be no real will to move forward to narrow differences, according to Eiland. Neither side -- Israeli or Palestinian -- can make a significant change in its position due to domestic political reasons. In addition, the two leading proponents of disengagement within the Government of Israel -- PM Sharon and Vice Premier Peres -- have fundamentally different philosophies and approaches to the steps that should be taken post-disengagement.

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DIFFERENT POST-DISENGAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES OF PERES AND SHARON  
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19. (C) Eiland said Peres believes that improving the economic situation in the Gaza Strip is the fundamental condition for any future process. Thus, from the Peres perspective, it is in Israel's interest to improve Palestinian lives, and to allocate Israeli resources to that end. This will also strengthen President Abbas. In contrast, Eiland said, Sharon's position is that Israel will no longer be responsible for life in Gaza. Sharon may be willing to help, but not because it is in Israel's interest to do so. Sharon is willing to take some security risks -- e.g., opening the Philadelphi corridor and possibly the seaport too -- in order to demonstrate that Gaza is now a Palestinian responsibility. Eiland sketched out how these differing views could affect Israeli policy options. For example, on passages between Gaza and the West Bank, Eiland said Peres would be willing to pay a high price (to facilitate this objective) whereas Sharon does not see an Israeli interest in doing so. "Gazans can get what they need from Egypt," is how Eiland summarized Sharon's hypothetical response to Peres, adding that Sharon will not be willing to take the security risk that he perceives would result from providing a Gaza-West Bank connection.

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THE WAY AHEAD  
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10. (C) Eiland suggested three ways to improve the situation, adding that they will require the goodwill and flexibility of the parties, Egypt and others in the international community.

-- (1) Resume real, productive dialogue with the Palestinians on the economic side. "We were preoccupied (with disengagement). Now we can work with Wolfensohn" and the Palestinians. For example, Israel built a new, modern passage facility at Erez. The Palestinians will not cooperate on using the facility because they do not agree where the (demarcation) line is located.

-- (2) Strengthen security cooperation between the two sides, which started on a good basis during disengagement, and could expand to other areas post-disengagement. The objective would be to transfer more responsibility for other areas and cities. The PA has changed some "old figures" in the past few months, and this has strengthened the capacity of the PA.

-- (3) "Rebuild the (Palestinian) nation." Assistance could be provided to the PA to support legislative and municipal systems. In return, the PA will be required to become more accountable. Benchmarks, in Eiland's view, would include the gradual "fading out" of independent militias. Weapons cannot be collected overnight, but the PA can determine -- in a day -- that it is illegal for Palestinians to carry weapons. He acknowledged that prospects for the PA achieving such benchmarks would be improved if they do not appear to be dictated by the GOI.

11. (C) Eiland's deputy, Eran Etzion, stressed the

importance for the international community to pressure Hamas to disband its militia before the January 25 elections. DAS Dibble asked Etzion for specific actions that Etzion would suggest. In reply, Etzion mentioned the role that UNSCR 1559 had played in Lebanon, but could not explain how such a precedent would work in Gaza after Israeli disengagement. Etzion acknowledged that policy recommendations usually boiled down to increasing pressure on the PA. Eiland commented, in a moment of candor, that it might not necessarily be bad to let Hamas participate in the political process, but he said President Abbas had not exacted an appropriate price for the participation of Hamas.

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ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO: STAGNATION WILL LEAD TO VIOLENCE  
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¶12. (C) Eiland said the alternative to pursuing the options described above is stagnation, which increases the risk of violence, i.e. a "third Intifada," quoting PA Minister Dahlan. The DCM asked whether the GOI anticipated further unilateral measures to prevent such a scenario. Eiland acknowledged that the GOI had not begun to dismantle outposts, but claimed that the GOI had done "too much" freezing of construction in settlements. DAS Dibble recalled Israeli obligations on these issues, and the DCM suggested the GOI move forward on the basis of the Sasson report.

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RAFAH AND PALESTINIAN RESPONSIBILITY FOR GAZA  
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¶13. (C) DAS Dibble asked Eiland about the situation at Rafah and Israeli views on timing. She questioned how long, in Eiland's view, it would take to come to agreement on the Rafah crossing, given the pressure the PA is under to find a solution quickly on access from Gaza in and out of Egypt. Eiland confided that the GOI had made a mistake in its dialogue with the Egyptians and Palestinians. Certain arrangements could have been agreed upon before disengagement. Nonetheless, Eiland said, the GOI and PA basically agreed on five general points:

-- Someday, movement of people and baggage between Egypt and Gaza at Rafah will occur with no Israeli inspection or presence.

-- Movement of cargo will be via Nitzana or Kerem Shalom.

-- Possibility of a third party monitor (not as a requirement, but as an option);

-- If Rafah becomes operational, there will be no need for other crossings for people to and from Egypt.

-- If these arrangements work reliably, Israel will not change the customs envelope between Israel and Gaza.

¶14. (C) Eiland assessed that the gap between positions arose not so much over issues of timing (six months versus two weeks), but on the practical arrangements that need to be made between three or possibly four parties concerned. In particular, the question of who might enter Gaza freely remains unresolved. Eiland said Israel had decided to allow visitors (to enter Gaza) without prior clearance or agreement "unless Israeli intelligence suggests that they are coming to do bad things." Eiland gave examples: If Palestinian refugees want to return from Lebanon, Israel does not want to be involved. If the Iranian Revolutionary Guards seek entry, Israel would want agreement (from the Palestinians and Egyptians) that they cannot enter. Eiland suggested that Kerem Shalom would be an interim solution until understandings are reached on these issues. "We want to make sure the PA controls Gaza. If they do not, will Israeli commitments to keep the Customs Envelope open remain?"

¶15. (C) In closing, Eiland recalled that, until recently, Israel's highest priority had been full control of the Gaza/West Bank customs envelope. Post-disengagement, Israel's much more important goal is to demonstrate that it has no responsibility for the Palestinians. He noted that Israel's only true security guarantee would be to unilaterally transform Erez and Karni into international passages and to change the customs envelope, but acknowledged that this would separate Gaza and the West Bank and result in severe economic consequences for the Palestinians. Such a decision would mean the collapse of the PA in Gaza, in Eiland's view. DAS Dibble asked Eiland about the state of Israeli-Palestinian talks on Gaza. Eiland said that PA Minister Dahlan's recent sickness had delayed discussions, but that timing of a Rafah agreement was negotiable.

¶16. (U) This cable has been cleared by NEA DAS Dibble.

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